

Planning for a new Chicagoland

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Editorial
Board

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How much change is in store for us by the time 2050 rolls around? Maybe the best way to size that up is to think about where we are now, compared to three decades ago. In 1984, the Dow was at 1211, a matinee movie ticket cost \$2.50 and windows were still glass portals in walls, not computer operating systems. [Naperville's](#) population was 49,215, about a third of what it is now. State Street was still a pedestrian mall, thanks to a Jane Byrne brain cramp.

Change is inevitable and often unforeseeable. But a lot of change can be anticipated — and managed. Regionally, there's a group called the [Chicago Metropolitan Agency for Planning](#) that shoulders the responsibility of preparing the Chicago area for what looms ahead. Its current task: Ready the region for 2050.

Challenges the Chicago region faces now will become Sisyphean in 33 years unless we start crafting a blueprint for solving them. That's CMAP's job. Here's a look at a few of those challenges:

- Economic inequality: The Chicago area has yet to make much headway bridging the chasm between haves and have-nots. Disinvestment continues to ravage the city's South and West sides and many south suburbs, perpetuating a cycle of violence and outmigration that destroys neighborhoods. In the meantime, downtown and the North Side flourish, recharged by a steady influx of millennials. It's an imbalance that robs residents in struggling neighborhoods of access to parity in education, jobs, housing and transportation.

"These residents are not well connected to opportunities provided by the region's economy," CMAP states in preview report to "On To 2050," the regional comprehensive plan that the agency will release next year. "As a result, a substantial portion of the region's human capital — embodied in the talents and skills of these residents — is being wasted."

- Transportation: It's hard to wrap our heads around the notion of city streets filled with driverless cars, perhaps with taxi drones buzzing overhead. But a little more than a century ago, the motor vehicle was the contraption widely regarded as a fad with a short shelf life. "The horse is here to stay, but the automobile is only a novelty — a fad," the president of the Michigan Savings Bank told Henry Ford's lawyer, Horace Rackham, in 1903, advising him not to invest in Ford's venture.

We don't know if driverless cars will be ubiquitous by 2050. But when they begin appearing on local roads, the region will have to adapt its infrastructure — for traffic movement, for parking and much more. That will require CMAP's planning to be "nimble," the agency's executive director, Joseph Szabo, tells us. "We know the changes will be immense, and yet we have responsibility to, as best as we can, prepare for that future." The 2050 plan, he adds, is malleable. "It's not like it's done once and put on the shelf. It gets reviewed and renewed."

- Climate change: We know Arctic ice is melting and layers of ice over Antarctica are disappearing. But climate change also has very real ramifications for the Chicago area. Flooding may worsen. Temperature fluctuations could become more extreme, while droughts could last longer. The region will need to ensure that stormwater and flood plain policies — as well as its decisions on zoning, land use and new development — reflect the effects of climate change.

The time and thought that CMAP puts into all this planning is by no means academic. Its research and guidance will help steer decisions about how and where local, county and state governments spend your tax dollars. And transportation projects in Chicago's seven-county region that are vying for federal funding must be endorsed by CMAP's 2050 plan to be eligible for that money.

What does all of this mean for Chicago-area citizens and local officials? It means they have a big stake in the shaping of the 2050 plan. The agency needs the region's residents and local officials to weigh in. What should the plan prioritize? What's been omitted that needs inclusion? What sounds realistic, what doesn't?

That feedback can be relayed to CMAP in several ways: by attending one of the agency's 2050 panel discussions (the last two are slated for July 19 in Homewood and Aug. 15 in Libertyville), providing input at one of 20-plus agency kiosks throughout the region or filling out CMAP's online survey. You can find all the information at www.chicagotribune.com/onto2050.

Yes, our region is overwhelmed with real-time crises — the shape of Chicago's public school system, the state budget impasse and regional transportation gridlock, to name a few. But we risk deepening today's crises by failing to plan now for our future three decades from now. We're glad CMAP's doing the heavy lifting. Now we hope the rest of the region — through its feedback — pitches in.

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